

John and Nanbaree

Doris Chadwick



JOHN AND NANBAREE

DORIS CHADWICK

COVER AND MAP BY
GLORIS SMITH YOUNG



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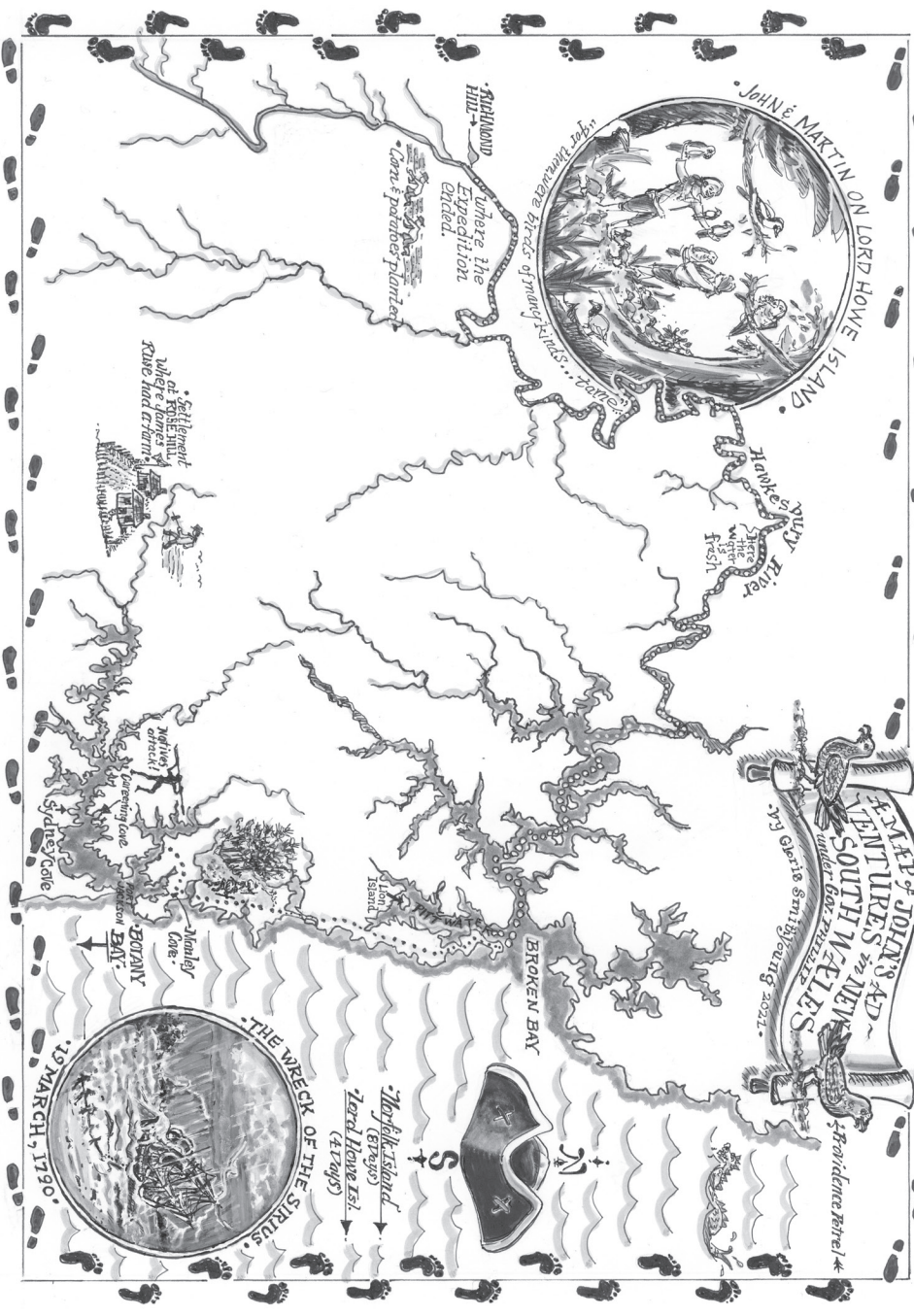
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To all who read
THE NEW SOUTH WALES SCHOOL MAGAZINE
1922-1960
To those who helped me edit
and produce it
and in particular to
V. C. N. Blight
New South Wales Government Printer



JOHN & MARTIN ON LORD HOWE ISLAND.

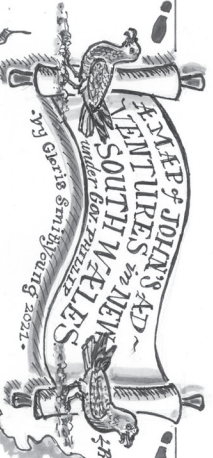


The Macleay birds of many kinds... James

Ryde Hill - where the Expedition Ended. Large patches planted

Settlement of Ryde Hill where James & Rube had a farm

Hawkesbury River
The water is very fresh



A MAP of JOHN'S ADVENTURES in the SOUTH WEALES under Capt. THORPE 2021.

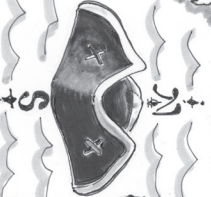
A Providence Jewel

THE WRECK OF THE SIRIUS.



19 MARCH, 1790

Thorpe Island (57yds)
Lord Howe Isl. (47yds)



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CHAPTER I
TO THE WOODS WITH NANBAREE

‘**W**HATEVER you do this afternoon,’ Mamma told John as he got up from the table to answer Martin’s whistle, ‘you must not be late home.’

‘Because,’ said Sue, ‘it’s the King’s birthday, and we have to light the bonfire.’

‘And then go to a play,’ Mamma announced.

‘A play!’ This was the first John had heard of it. He almost disbelieved her. How could a play be acted in Sydney Cove, a mere straggle of huts in a place where white people had lived for only eighteen months!

‘Yes, indeed,’ Mamma’s servant, Debby, explained, ‘a real live play. The convicts are putting it on in one of their huts. You’ll probably go to sleep, you and Sue, and your friends, Martin and Jenny, but your Mamma is determined that you should go because it is the first play to be acted in this new land of New South Wales.’

‘And Nanbaree?’ John asked, thinking of the black boy recently brought in ill to the settlement, who knew so little English.

‘Yes, Nanbaree, too,’ Mamma replied. ‘We are all to have supper here before we light the bonfire and then go to the play.’

Martin was waiting outside when John emerged from the kitchen with the news, and with him was Nanbaree. The bonfire was stacked perfectly in readiness for the blaze to come. What, then, should they do on this short winter afternoon? Beyond the collection of huts that made up the town, the woods called, and before them gleamed the blue waters of the Cove upon which the *Sirius* and *Supply* lay snugly at anchor.

For weeks John and Martin had been waiting for Nanbaree to re-

cover from the smallpox. 'We'll take him to the woods,' John said to Martin. 'He will be able to show us how to climb trees the native way and to get wild honey. Come on, Nanbaree. Honey! We want you to get honey,' and whistling to his dog, Gyp, he led the way.

'But we must not take him too far.' Martin was always the one to urge caution. 'If we do, he might go back to his own people, and the Governor does not want him to do that.'

John well knew of the Governor's wish. Ever since he and Martin had come with their parents to Sydney Cove, there had been clashes between the natives and the convicts. The Governor had tried to make peace by bringing in a native by force, named Arabanoo, in the hope that he would learn the white men's ways, and so persuade his own people that they meant no harm. But Arabanoo had died, had given his life for Nanbaree and a native girl, Abaroo, for when the black people had been found to be suffering from smallpox, these two had been brought into the hospital, and he had nursed them.

'The Governor wants Nanbaree and Abaroo to grow up here to learn to trust us, so that they can tell their own people that we wish to live at peace with them,' Martin reminded John. 'We'll have to be careful.'

But John was sure that Nanbaree would not try to escape. 'He is too interested in what is happening at the Cove,' he said to Martin, 'and in the new food he is getting—and in us.'

It was true. The boy had taken to John and Martin from the beginning, especially to John. On the very first day they had come with Governor Phillip to Port Jackson, they had landed in a little cove to boil the pot, and there John had seen the merry-eyed black boy and had given him a red ribbon. Often in their tramps through the woods in the months that followed, they had met him, and once he had saved them from hostile natives. John had become so attached to his 'black boy', as he called him, that he would have been very distressed had the boy died.

He did not die. He was there amongst them, and John was determined to find out many things about the natives that he had always wanted to know—how they climbed trees, and speared fish, and built canoes.

'To the woods, Nanbaree,' he said now, pointing to the green belt of trees around the Cove. 'We want you to show us how to climb trees and get wild honey.'

Nanbaree grinned. 'Oney! Nanbaree get 'oney!' He understood that. Time enough when they got there for him to understand what else they wished him to do.

These trees that the natives climbed in some unknown way intrigued the boys. How did the natives do it? Steps on the trunk so far apart that they could not be the steps of a man. Now they would find out.

John picked up a tomahawk from an out-house as he went through the back garden. Then, seeing a tinder-box that Pete, the gardener, had left there, he put it in his pocket. They might need it. They would have to hurry, or someone would call them back. Mamma did not look kindly on such excursions into the woods.

As they came to the trees, they glanced back on Sydney Cove. The tiny town looked so warm and comfortable in the bright June sunshine; the ordered rows of wattle-and-daub huts dipping down to the water's edge, creeping out along the western ridge above the hospital towards the observatory; the many-paned windows of the Governor's two-storied house on the east, dominating all, as they winked goldenly into the westering sun...

But the boys had no thought for the beauty of the Cove. Their eyes were on the marquee and the collection of huts that constituted John's home. Someone might see them—John's sister, Sue, or her friend, Jenny. They had purposely evaded the girls. A hint of colour in the garden made them hurry still more.

Nanbaree was now striding jauntily ahead. He had taken the lead, his three-cornered hat at a rakish angle on his head, his coat unbuttoned, his shirt tail flying, and his black feet stepping noiselessly but surely over stones and twigs and leaves.

John remembered the day when the black boy had been given white boy's clothes. Nanbaree had been so proud of his shoes, clip-clopping over the wooden floors of the hospital, intently listening to the noise he made. Then, within an hour, he had cast them aside, and

no persuasion could get them back on his feet. Trousers, coat, shirt, and hat—particularly hat—he wore with style and pride, but shoes he kicked from him in disgust.

As John watched him striding along, he was secretly making up his mind to ask Mamma for permission to go without shoes. He had longed for some time to do that, but she had always refused. Perhaps she might relent now that shoes were growing so scarce, with no ships arriving from England, and stores becoming so low.

But what was Nanbaree up to? He had taken off his coat and was throwing it in the bushes.

John looked at Martin. Was he about to escape?

And now he was dispensing with his shirt.

‘I think we had better take him back,’ Martin said.

But there was no persuading Nanbaree—not with all the signs and pointing they could make. His face was set for the woods, and to the woods he was going, a quaint figure with only a hat on now, for just at that moment he was slipping his trousers from his waist.

The two boys followed more slowly. They had already come farther than they had intended. What if other natives came from the woods to join Nanbaree? Would they snatch him and take him away?

Suddenly he stopped. He had picked up a piece of pipeclay. And now he had caught a bee sipping quietly on the edge of a puddle. He was dusting its body with the pipeclay. He had let the bee go, and there it was sailing away, a speck of white against the green of the trees. So that was his way of finding a wild bees’ nest! He was running in pursuit, and they were following. The flutter of white was moving straight in front of them. There was no mistaking the bee, for it veered not to right or to left. Then suddenly it was gone.

The boys slowed down. ‘And that’s the end of it,’ Martin said.

But Nanbaree was running on, pointing in the direction the bee had taken. What was he trying to tell them? Was it that a bee flies from water to its hive by the most direct route? Dimly they realised that by training he knew more than they, and quickened pace. He had reached the tree, when they came upon it, a tall gum with a dead

limb spreading like a finger above them, its trunk smooth and satiny and straight.

With a laugh Nanbaree grabbed the tomahawk. He was chopping at the trunk at the height of the left thigh. A slanting cut and a horizontal one, and there was a notch sufficient to hold the ball of his big toe. He was chopping another at the height of his right shoulder. And now he was up, his left toe in the bottom hole, his left arm around the tree. He was on the second notch; he was cutting a third, he was moving into it, the tomahawk held tightly between his teeth, his arms embracing the trunk to pull himself upwards. And so on to a fourth and fifth, the foot each time being raised nearly as high as the opposite thigh. So that was why the notches seemed so far apart!

‘Perhaps we could do it,’ John said.

But Martin was not so sure. ‘It’s harder than you think,’ he replied.

Nanbaree had reached the curve of the limb. The bees were flying round in an angry cloud and settling on his dark skin.

‘He’ll be stung!’ John gasped in admiration.

If he were, Nanbaree paid no heed. He was chopping at the limb; it was falling; he had begun to slide down, and John and Martin were stepping gingerly towards it. But the bees were about, taking revenge. John felt a red hot needle pierce the back of his hand. ‘Did you get one, too?’ he yelled to Martin. ‘Take out the sting,’ and they both ran to a safe distance.

Not Nanbaree! He was already at the limb, cutting out the hive, and offering them delicious pieces of comb. It was too tempting. They forgot their stings, forgot the bees, and taking the comb sank their teeth into the sticky sugary sweetness. All three expressed approval by soft murmurings and a loud sucking noise that Mamma would have called ‘disgusting’.

They had finished the comb when John thought rather sadly that he should have kept some for Mamma and Sue and Jenny. There never were enough sweet things at the Cove. ‘More,’ he said to the black boy, holding out his hands. ‘More honey for Mamma and Sue and Jenny, and Martin’s mother.’

Taking the tomahawk, Nanbaree searched about again amongst the trees. "Oney, no," he said at length. '*Boo-roo-min*, yes,' and he pointed to scratchings on the trunk of a hollow tree.

Boo-roo-min, A possum! That would do. A possum meant fresh meat, and fresh meat was scarcer than sugar. Why, a lizard was acceptable, and snakes a dainty!

'*Gwee-un*?' Nanbaree asked.

Gwee-un, the native word for fire! So Nanbaree wanted fire to be made with the tinder-box. Eagerly John drew it from his pocket. He was thrilled. Now they were to watch the native way of setting a trap.

Already Martin was gathering dry leaves and sticks, and soon Nanbaree was placing them in the hollow, setting them alight with the spark John had struck from the flint, and dampening them with grass to make a long spiral of smoke ascending upwards in the column of the trunk. Then, seizing the tomahawk, he began again to cut a notch, and then another, and slowly to climb up and up, until he reached the top, where the smoke had now begun to emerge in a thin thread.

Would the possum come out? They waited expectantly, adding more leaves, more grass to the smoking fire at the bottom. Yes, there it was! It had come out at the bottom and not at the top. With a cry of surprise John grasped at its tail, and Martin fell over in his effort to seize the animal. But instead of catching it they found themselves gripping one another, watching the possum as it streaked across the grass and climbed another tree with a speed too quick for them, too quick even for Gyp, John's dog.

Nanbaree came down the tree and was convulsed with mirth. He looked at them as much as to say, 'Fancy having a possum within your grasp and not being able to hold it! These white boys!' and his merry eyes laughed, and his broad mouth grinned more widely than before.

But John was secretly pleased. Possums and flying squirrels were too beautiful and dainty to eat. He was glad the animal had escaped.

As he lay on the grass, resting and thinking about it, he looked at the tree, and again came the desire to climb. If Nanbaree could do it, surely he could. Impulsively he began to take off his shoes and stockings.

'You had better not,' Martin began to persuade him.

But John had made up his mind. 'I won't be cutting the notches, only climbing,' he said. 'Nanbaree thinks I can do it. What do you say, Nanbaree?' and he pointed upwards.

Nanbaree nodded pleasantly. After all, he thought it was easy.

With a skip John was at the bottom of the trunk, his left toe in the first notch. Now Martin and Nanbaree were helping him up, his right toe in the second, his left arm round the trunk. With a heave his left toe was in the third notch, and he was pulling himself up for the fourth. But what if he let go? He looked below and saw the two boys watching grimly. He looked up, and the top of the trunk seemed a long way off. But he had made up his mind that he would get there. Gripping the trunk firmly, he pulled himself up again. It was on the next step that his toe found difficulty in finding the notch, and for a wild moment he seemed to hang dangling by his arms as the other toe lost touch. No, he would not give in. Impulsive he might be, but he always carried out his purpose. Another heave, and he went on...

The top was close now. He reached it with a mighty pull, and sat on the first limb. With a feeling of exhilaration he waved to the others below. Well, he had got there. What would Cookie say when he told him—Cookie who had always laughed at his impulsiveness? Cookie, the cook on the *Supply*, with whom he had spent so many wild days at sea on the long trip to New South Wales! He wished Cookie could see him now.

He looked around among the tree-tops, idly enjoying all he could see, when suddenly a scratching behind made him turn quickly. The possum! It could not be. But it was its mate, sent up the hollow trunk by the smoke. Nanbaree would have grabbed it and hit its head viciously on the limb, but somehow John could not. The boys below shouted, calling him to catch it, but his attempt was only half-hearted. The furry body was too high now for him to reach. Let it stay there in peace.

This was the moment when he heard the voices of the natives. Guttural tones he knew so well! Friends of Nanbaree's! They were

coming. He was sure of it. And they might try to take Nanbaree away. He must descend as quickly as possible. But how? For the first time he was afraid. How? Put his toe in each of the notches? Shinny down? The ground below him swam before his eyes, and with it the trees, the boys. Were there two faces down there or three? He shut his eyes, then opened them again. Surely there must be a third person!

They were shouting from below! Had he heard aright? Cookie's voice! There was a third person, and it was Cookie. Had he been with the natives whose voices he had heard? He could not hear them now.

'What be ye staying up there for, lad?' Cookie was yelling. 'Always did like getting into tight spots, didn't ye?'

John passed his hand over his eyes and dared not look.

'Come on, ye—we be a-waiting for ye. See, I ha' some birds for your Mamma. Maybe she'll cook 'em for ye for supper. 'Tis King's birthday, ye know, a day for a feast.'

John looked down again and recoiled. He couldn't, he just couldn't climb down those notches.

'Come on, lad. If ye stay up there all night, ye'll miss the bonfire and the play. What be the matter?'

John hated to say it, but he had to do so. 'I can't, Cookie! Every time I look down I'm giddy.'

'So that be it? Well, well, it's happened to better men than ye, lad. Wait a minute.'

There was scuffling and walking round below, the noise of voices, of sharp orders, and then for some moments quiet. John sat on the limb and did not dare look down again. But he was no longer hysterical. Cookie was there. Cookie would find a way.

'Ahoy there! Catch this!' He felt a vine slap his leg. So that was what they had been looking for in the woods. Another throw and he had it in his hands. 'And see that ye tie a proper knot, young land-lubber. None o' your grannies this time.'

John took the vine and tied it firmly to the limb, then sat back and closed his eyes again. Someone was testing the strength of the vine from below. It held—yes, it held strongly.

'Now come on. Shinny ye down,' Cookie was calling. 'Close your eyes and hold tight.'

It seemed easy enough explained like that. John clung to the limb and twined his legs round the vine. He was moving now, quicker, quicker; he almost seemed to be shooting through the air. With a thud he hit the earth, and they were helping him to his feet, laughing so at his discomfiture that he began to laugh, too. It had been nasty up there, but now, in safety on the ground, it did not seem so bad as it had appeared.

'*Boo-roo-min,*' Nanbaree cried, teasing John for the butter fingers that had lost the possum.

John shrugged his shoulders and pointed to Cookie's birds. 'It does not matter,' he said. 'Cookie has something for Mamma.' Nanbaree would not understand his compassion for the animal, why he could not bring himself to kill it horribly, as if he were murdering it.

Slowly John put on his stockings and shoes, remembering suddenly the voices he had heard. 'But the natives, Cookie? I heard them when I was up the tree,' and he got in a panic and looked around. 'They might have been coming for Nanbaree.'

'Aye, and so ye did, lad. They be a-gabbling to me. Saw ye, too, up yon tree. A-following me, they were, as I killed the birds. When I caught sight o' ye masted like that in the tree, I bade 'em begone. Saw young Nanbaree, too, I guess. Nothing 'ud miss their sharp eyes.'

Cookie picked up the birds and strode ahead to give them to Mamma, while John and Martin followed more slowly with Nanbaree, still wearing only the hat at a rakish angle on his head.

The sight of it made John remember the clothes that had been cast in the bushes. He knew now that Nanbaree had discarded them because they would only have been a hindrance. 'Trousers, shirt,' he called to the black boy, with expressive movements of his hands. But Nanbaree merely laughed and refused to search for them. Or was he in his own way searching all the time? Look where they would, this bush or that, John and Martin could not find the clothes. And yet when a giggling in front of them made them hurry forward, Nanbaree was there.

Sue and Jenny, of course, laughing at the rakish angle of the hat on the naked Nanbaree, and standing strangely with their hands behind their backs. And with them Abaroo, the native girl, who had been brought in with smallpox about the same time as Nanbaree. She stood there smirking, a gawkish girl of fifteen, only half understanding the reason for the merriment, Nanbaree's trousers held untidily behind her back.

So the girls were the culprits. They had seen Nanbaree discard his clothes and played this practical joke.

'Come on,' John demanded, 'give them up,' and as he spoke a gun boomed out from the Cove.

'The guns!' Sue shouted, and trousers, shirt, and coat fell in all directions as the girls made in the direction of the Cove, followed by the still naked Nanbaree.

John picked up the clothes and followed. He knew it would be useless to call Nanbaree. In any case he was just as anxious to get to the Cove. This was the final salute of the King's birthday. They must not miss it. Certainly Nanbaree must not miss it. He had been amazed at the burst of guns at dawn, by the joyous *feu-de-joie* at the parade of marines, by the second burst of guns at midday, and now by these. He had already outstripped the girls and would be the first to reach the Cove.

The guns were splendid, twenty-one from the *Sirius*, twenty-one from the *Supply*. Nanbaree was almost beside himself with joy.

'Not as good as last year,' Sue said regretfully. 'Then there were more ships and we had sixty-seven.'

Ships! Would they ever come again? That was the thought of everyone. For eighteen months the Governor and his little band of marines and convicts had been at Sydney Cove, and as yet no additional ships or supplies had arrived.

'Surely it won't be long now,' John heard Mamma say to Martin's mother, as they all gathered in the mud kitchen for supper. Nanbaree was in his clothes again, his black eyes alight in anticipation as he watched Debby grill the birds on the spit, the hat still at the same rakish angle.

It was a great night. When Papa came home, the bonfire went up in a flurry of smoke and flames and stars. The spectacle was worth all their effort—so John and Martin and the girls thought. All, especially Nanbaree, were inclined to linger as Papa hurried them on.

‘Now come along,’ he said, gathering his little band. ‘You have something else to see—the very first play to be acted in this land.’

They looked about in amazement when they saw how the play-hut had been transformed. A stage had been prepared and around the walls stained paper had been hung in an effort to hide the wattle-and-daub. Candles fluttered and flickered in their sockets, and already the audience was being enveloped in a soft film of smoke. Soon the air would become heavy, but no one seemed to mind. The play was to begin—the first play to be acted in New South Wales—Farquhar’s *Recruiting Officer*.

‘Go to the front and sit on the floor,’ Papa told the children. ‘There won’t be enough chairs for everyone.’

That suited them well. In the front they could see and hear; they would even be near the Governor.

‘Hat, take off your hat,’ John whispered to Nanbaree, as he removed his own, but Nanbaree was deaf to all persuasion—not even when the band struck up *God Save the King*, and the Governor took his seat. The hat still stayed at the same rakish angle on his head.

Then the play began, and all were carried off to the England of a hundred years before, where a recruiting officer was trying to raise troops for his regiment.

Once or twice John turned to watch Nanbaree. His bright eyes never left the stage. John wondered what he was thinking. The black boy could not understand the dialogue; for him it was only a mime, but as such it held his attention. Was he thinking of the wild dances and sing-songs that the natives sometimes held in the woods?

Nanbaree watched it all through, and so did John and Martin, but Jenny and Sue had fallen asleep before it came to an end to the accompaniment of applause and praise for the fine acting of the convicts.

‘Quite an occasion,’ John heard the Governor say to Mamma, as

he stopped to speak to her afterwards. 'The first play to be acted in this land.'

Perhaps some day, John thought, people would remember this day, when the little settlement of Sydney Cove would have grown to what the Governor believed it would be--a great city.

Nanbaree was moving off with Mr White, the surgeon, to the hospital where he lived, and Martin and his parents to the parade ground.

Slowly John followed Mamma and Papa and Jenny and Sue. The bonfires had burnt out and darkness had spread over the Cove. The second King's birthday in the new land of New South Wales had come to an end.